



Strategic Placement of IVACG in the Evolving Micronutrient Field

For over a quarter of a century, the International Vitamin A Consultative Group (IVACG) has served as the authoritative scientific organization advancing the control of vitamin A deficiency and its health consequences. IVACG, which works closely with relevant units of the UN system (WHO, UNICEF, and FAO), achieves its public health goals by:

- drawing together technical experts and task forces
- convening workshops
- publishing authoritative policy statements
- interacting with governmental, nongovernmental, multilateral, and international agencies
- convening regularly scheduled international meetings of scientists and policy makers where scientific results and programmatic experiences are shared, critical research issues are identified, and scientific findings are translated into relevant policies and recommendations to guide prevention and control programs.

BACKGROUND

The magnitude and direction of vitamin A research and its application have changed enormously over the past quarter century. Several important milestones have marked this change. In 1974 and 1980 the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) sponsored international meetings in Jakarta, Indonesia, on vitamin A deficiency and xerophthalmia. As a result of a perceived need expressed at the 1974 Jakarta meeting, USAID formed IVACG to advance the study and control of vitamin A deficiency.

Vitamin A became a critical component of the agenda of the micronutrient deficiency meeting “Hidden Hunger,” held in Montreal Canada, in 1991 and co-sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), USAID, WHO, and the World Bank. The FAO/WHO-sponsored International Conference on Nutrition, held in Rome, Italy, in 1992, also highlighted the importance of vitamin A deficiency, as did the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 2002 UN Special Session on Children. A World Fit for Children, the document that resulted from the 2002 UN Special Session on Children, calls for the elimination of vitamin A deficiency by 2010.

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The current vitamin A agenda has been largely shaped and advanced by a core group of interested investigators, policy makers, and public health experts of varying interests and backgrounds. These professionals, drawn from public and private institutes of developed and developing countries, work together in a loosely organized, relatively informal, flexible arrangement that has advanced the science and application of vitamin A control. This group represents the core constituency of IVACG which sets directions and meets current and emerging needs in the subject area.

From its start in 1975, IVACG has taken the initiative to create task forces that publish their scientifically based policy statements and recommendations, often in collaboration with other organizations, particularly WHO and UNICEF. Traditionally, members of the core group of IVACG have been congruent with the expert panels of each

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of these major collaborating agencies. Many original WHO recommendations were, in fact, results of IVACG working groups formed to follow up on the Jakarta meeting or to articulate recommendations following subsequent IVACG meetings. An example of this is the IVACG working group that used the latest available research to comprehensively revise recommendations for the design of vitamin A deficiency control programs. These revised recommendations were subsequently endorsed by participants at the XX IVACG meeting in Hanoi, February 11–17, 2001, and then published in *The Journal of Nutrition* (Sommer A, Davidson FR. Assessment and control of vitamin A deficiency: the Annecy Accords. *J Nutr* 2002; 132: 2845S–2850S).

With growing international interest in the control of vitamin A deficiency and its role in child survival programs, the prevention and control of vitamin A deficiency has become a “mainline” health and nutrition activity. Recent and well-funded international efforts to promote child survival through vitamin A supplementation have become especially visible. Indeed, prevention and control of vitamin A deficiency is now regarded as an integral component of an emerging strategy to integrate diverse efforts to increase child survival by controlling micronutrient deficiencies. Coordinated efforts to control micronutrient deficiencies are included in national action plans on food and nutrition to achieve the goals set by the World Summit for Children in 1990 and reiterated during the

International Conference on Nutrition in 1992. As a result, vitamin A deficiency control efforts have been a great success, expanding across 70 nations.

As evidence has grown about the potential health benefits of reducing deficiencies of other micronutrients in addition to vitamin A, particularly iron, folate, and zinc, health officials have increasingly considered administering vitamin A in combination with other micronutrients, either as supplements or as fortified dietary products. But little is known about the potential interaction, physical and physiologic, of simultaneously administered multiple micronutrients in chronically malnourished populations at varying risk of micronutrient deficiency and serious, recurrent infections (including HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria). Since programs to address other micronutrient deficiencies will inevitably be combined with vitamin A control efforts, it is critically important that relevant policies and decisions be based on sound science concerning the effect of administering multiple micronutrients simultaneously. Therefore, developing an adequate scientific basis for these policies and decisions will increasingly engage IVACG's attention.

IVACG TODAY

- IVACG represents the core group of professionals interested in vitamin A deficiency and its control.
- IVACG provides timely, definitive statements and policy recommendations concerning the state of the science, health effects, and their relevance to program formulation and implementation in the area of vitamin A deficiency and its control.
- IVACG provides a global forum every 18 to 24 months for hundreds of scientists and policymakers from around the globe to gather and share data and experiences. This is the largest regular gathering of groups and individuals that share a concern about the control of vitamin A deficiency and related micronutrients. Given the emerging interest in utilizing vitamin A deficiency control efforts to reduce other micronutrient deficiencies as well, the potential biologic and physiologic interactions between vitamin A and other micronutrients has become an important part of IVACG's scientific agenda.
- Interest groups have developed around other, individual micronutrients including: INACG (iron), IZiNCG (zinc), and ICCIDD (iodine). Because the solution to iodine deficiency is relatively independent of the other deficiencies, it has successfully continued to develop on its own. Both INACG and IZiNCG have benefited

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from holding short (one half to one full day) meetings appended to the IVACG global forum which is a three or four- day meeting attended by scientists and policymakers increasingly concerned about all three of these micronutrients and their interrelationships.

IVACG'S EVOLVING ROLE

With the maturation of the vitamin A field, IVACG's functions and functioning have begun to change. It is important that these changes be recognized, that the appropriate role of IVACG for the next decade be formulated, that this formulation be widely disseminated, and that its role be fully realized. This will help ensure that IVACG focuses its efforts and resources on those functions and activities it is uniquely capable of carrying out, given its position, intellectual resources, and organizational structure and funding.

A strategic assessment of the present and future status of the vitamin A field and IVACG's role in it must recognize the following:

■ Despite the proliferation of new organizations and growing interest in vitamin A deficiency control by established organizations, IVACG represents the only established institution with international representation for which vitamin A is the prime area of interest; engages a large proportion of the world's leading scientists, policy makers, and public health officials devoted to this problem; has a flexible structure facilitating timely identification and response to key scientific issues; and, given its long history and centrality to the issue of vitamin A deficiency and its prevention and control, is widely recognized as a most credible source and galvanizing force in the field. IVACG should retain this role and its authority through its periodic meetings, task forces, publications, and policy statements. It should continue its practice of turning its spotlight on issues of greatest relevance, using its uniquely varied constituency to ensure that research findings are elucidated and that their potential practical applications for intervention programs are recognized by as wide an audience as possible. Hence,

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which control of vitamin A
deficiency is the primary focus.**

IVACG should remain a scientific body focusing on important research findings related to vitamin A and their policy implications for deficiency prevention and should continue to serve

- 1. as a forum for stimulating relevant scientific inquiry***
- 2. as an authority in interpreting scientific data***
- 3. as an assembly for critical discussion of new discoveries in vitamin A research***
- 4. as a force for encouraging the translation of those discoveries into policy options and practical applications***

■ IVACG's areas of particular interest have evolved with new research findings and their potential application. Initially these dwelt on clinical classification of xerophthalmia and assessment, treatment, and prevention of blindness. More recently, the focus has broadened to include issues of systemic morbidity and mortality, particularly as they impact women and children. The coming years should witness a continuing evolution of concerns, with special emphasis on the assessment and classification of marginal vitamin A deficiency and its consequences, with greater attention paid to the broad array of intervention strategies, especially long-term, sustainable food-based programs including fortification, and optimal schedules for periodic supplementation.

■ Given the growing interest in micronutrient deficiencies as a whole, and the importance of biochemical and physiologic interactions between micronutrients, micronutrient

interactions will play an increasingly important role in developing a scientific basis for future programs aimed at controlling micronutrient deficiencies. Inevitably, these programs will include, if not be built upon, routine vitamin A control efforts. In response, IVACG will seek to encourage research on micronutri-

ent interactions and serve as a platform for its elucidation. IVACG meetings will devote increased exposure to the results of these investigations and their policy and programmatic implications. IVACG will continue to work collaboratively with other organizations who share these interests.

■ IVACG will continue to provide technical advice at the highest institutional levels and make efforts to ensure application of its technical advice as a way of attaining goals set by the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 2002

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1990 World Summit for Children and the 2002 UN Special Session on Children.

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UN Special Session on Children. Numerous organizations are eager to provide detailed technical advice to individual country and regional programs, governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). IVACG should not compete in this arena; that is, it is not an operational entity. Rather, IVACG should continue to serve as a reliable source of current scientific and technical knowledge as it relates to vitamin A deficiency and its interaction with other macro- and micronutrients, and how these may vary under different ecologic situations. Its role lies in identifying the need and providing the impetus and expertise for authoritative policy statements and recommendations upon which others can act. There continues to be a clear need for such statements and directions.

■ IVACG is a proactive scientific group whose existence and activities have had a major role in advancing knowledge and generating interest in vitamin A deficiency prevention and control issues worldwide. This remains an appropriate and necessary role for IVACG in the years to come.

In summary, given its historical evolution (and that of the vitamin A field), IVACG will concentrate its future efforts on the stimulation and dissemination of new knowledge, on translating that new knowledge to assist others in its practical application, and on providing authoritative policy statements and recommendations that others can use to develop appropriate micronutrient deficiency prevention and control programs

About IVACG

Established in 1975, the International Vitamin A Consultative Group guides international activities for reducing vitamin A deficiency in the world. IVACG concentrates its efforts on stimulating and disseminating new knowledge, translating that new knowledge to enable its practical application, and providing authoritative policy statements and recommendations that others can use to develop appropriate prevention and control programs.

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The ILSI Research Foundation's Human Nutrition Institute serves as the IVACG Secretariat.

